



Montgomery County Council

From the Office of Councilmember Phil Andrews

For Immediate Release

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Remarks of Montgomery County Councilman Phil Andrews on retrofitting high-rise residential buildings with fire sprinklers, and comments on the proposed contract with County firefighters

"As chair of the Public Safety Committee, I have championed fire safety. In 2002, I sponsored the law that requires that all schools be inspected for fire code violations annually. In 2003, I sponsored the law that requires that all new homes be built with fire sprinklers, a law that took effect on January 14, 2004. I have also helped ensure that the Council has rejected proposals to close fire stations, and have strongly supported additional staffing to improve fire and rescue coverage.

"Last week's fire in the Silver Spring high-rise apartment building that killed John and LaNita Seidel reminds us of the great danger of fires in high-rise residential buildings. We are very lucky that more lives weren't lost given that the 11th floor fire began when residents of the building were asleep, that the building's alarm did not sound, and that the building had no sprinklers.

"Fires in high-rise buildings pose great danger for residents AND for firefighters -- especially when there are significant numbers of elderly residents. Evacuations in a high-rise take much longer than other evacuations. In addition, the set-up time for fighting a high-rise fire is much longer than for most other fires; firefighters must haul equipment up stairs and help residents evacuate. While the fire service is setting up, the fire is growing exponentially -- unless sprinklers are present to douse it, contain it, or provide a feasible exit corridor.

"All high-rise residential buildings need fire sprinklers to make people in the buildings reasonably safe in event of a fire. A fire in a high-rise apartment or condominium without sprinklers is equally dangerous to residents and firefighters.

"Automatic fire sprinkler systems are the most effective way to contain and douse fires before they get out of control. Sprinklers give residents the chance to get out safely and firefighters the time to get in place to extinguish the fire, if the sprinkler hasn't already doused the fire.

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"I spoke with Fire Chief Tom Carr over the weekend. Chief Carr and I are in agreement that all high-rise residential buildings need fire sprinklers. I look forward to working with Chief Carr to pass legislation and approve regulations to ensure that all high-rise residences -- whether they are apartment buildings or condominiums -- are retrofitted with sprinklers within a reasonable period of time.

"It is critical that high-rise condominiums, as well as high-rise apartment buildings, be retrofitted with sprinklers. We can't condone different standards for fire safety among residents who are similarly situated and equally at risk.

"Over the weekend, I also spoke with Lesa Hoover, vice president of government affairs for the Apartment and Office Building Association (AOBA) and was pleased to hear that the organization is now prepared to support a requirement for retrofitting high-rise apartment buildings with fire sprinklers under certain timeframes and conditions. I will meet with Ms. Hoover this week to discuss important details.

"Many jurisdictions have adopted laws requiring that all high-rise residential buildings be retrofitted with fire sprinklers, including:

Nevada (adopted in 1982)
Massachusetts (adopted in 1986)
Louisiana (date for completion was 1999)
Atlanta, Georgia
Miami Beach, Florida
Phoenix, Scottsdale, and Tucson, Arizona
Boulder, Colorado
Billings, Montana
Fairbanks and Juneau, Alaska
Fresno and San Jose, California

"Montgomery County needs to move forward promptly and ensure that all residential high-rises are retrofitted with sprinklers as soon as reasonable.

"On another matter regarding fire safety, I want to comment on the contract with the firefighters union agreed to by the County Executive and that is before the Council for consideration.

"I believe in treating employees fairly and well. I was the lead sponsor of the County's Living Wage Law, the Smoke-free Restaurant Law, and the first local law in the nation that protects workers from genetic discrimination in employment.

"I have often agreed with the position of the County's unions and have supported almost all collective bargaining agreements that have come before the Council.

"However, I will not support this proposed contract with firefighters because it would harm public safety, and lead to requests from other unions that would not be in the public interest either.

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"I strongly oppose the provision in the contract that would allow firefighters to retire after 20 years (down from 25 years). We cannot afford to lose experienced firefighters at the peak of their careers. We need them to stay not leave.

"I am also very concerned that the contract would add more than \$40 million above current costs over the three years of the contract (\$4.5 million in FY 06, \$15 million in FY 07, and \$21.5 million in FY 08 above present costs), according to the fiscal impact statement prepared by the County's Office of Management and Budget. The 20-year retirement provision is projected to cost \$4.5 million a year, beginning in FY 07. These are huge increases that would be difficult to sustain, especially if other similar contracts were approved for police officers or other employees.

"There is no question that if the Council approves a 20-year retirement for firefighters that the Fraternal Order of Police and other County unions will insist on the same for their members.

"The job of unions is to get the best deal for their members. The duty of elected officials is to do what's best for the public. Often what's good for unions is good for the public. Not in this case, however.

"There are no 20-year retirement options in Montgomery County. Moreover, the County Council has twice turned back proposals to go in that direction. In the 1980s, the Council rejected a proposal initiated by the Fraternal Order of Police for a one-year "trial" of 20-year retirement. In the 1990s, the Council withheld funding that resulted in the Park Police scrapping a plan that allowed retirement after 22 years.

"This County Council needs to show the same resolve and send this contract back to the parties -- the County Executive and the Career Firefighters -- for renegotiation."

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